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Like a Horse and Carriage: (Non)Normativity in Hollywood Romance

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Abstract

Introduction

Two recent romantic comedies—*Friends with Benefits* and *Friends with Kids*—seek to re-situate the cultural logics of marriage by representing that supposed impossibility: the friendship between people of different sexes. These friendships are chosen as the site for particular kinds of intimacy—sex, in one case, and parenting in another—through a rejection or disenchantment with the limitations of heteronormative approaches to relationships. This initial, but of course not final, rejection of the investment in romance is obviously not entirely unheard of in the genre of romantic comedies—indeed, ambivalence about or even rejection of romance is central to many a romcom plotline, especially on the part of men. But the shift marked by these two films lies in the explicit and thorough problematisation of the optimistic investment in the marriage-like relationship (if not marriage itself), with the couples in both films proposing that the problem lies in expecting the marriage-like relationship to live up to the expectation that it will fulfil all of their needs.

Heteronormativity is a term used to capture the ways in which heterosexuality is produced as normal, natural and normative (Warner), the “straight” line, the supposed “life line,” with which everyone is expected to align (Ahmed 19-21). It is a truism to say that romantic comedies both display and reinforce heteronormativity, but as a result of their representations of it, they can also model and give voice to the anxieties, uncertainties and renegotiations that are being staged with this supposedly timeless institution.

Both films, then, offer a critique not simply of heteronormativity itself, but also a critique of what Lauren Berlant names “cruel optimism.” The alignment with heteronormativity that Ahmed describes is shaped by the recognition of normative, romantic, marriage-like heterosexual relationships as “good objects,” essential to a properly “good” life. But as Berlant demonstrates, this recognition is an attachment, and one which is sincerely and overly hopeful, as this object is unable to fulfil all of these hopes. This is “cruel optimism:”

a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility. What is cruel about these attachments... is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. (21)

In other words, there are numerous aspects of life that we believe are “good,” and enhance our lives and happiness, promising futures that we consider promising. But this commitment—attachment—to believing them to be key to the good life means that we miss, more and less consciously, the fact that they are frequently not giving, and perhaps not capable of giving, us happiness. We remain optimistic, but this optimism is cruel, because even when we arrange our lives around these “goods” and what they promise, they will almost disappoint us, wearing us out, threatening our well-being and undermining our relationships. But we remain committed to them because this has come to be what we understand life to be, and these “goods” remain core to our capacity to be future-oriented.

The protagonists in *Friends with Kids* and *Friends with Benefits* critique the optimism involved in being attached to marriage-like relationships, namely, the hope that they will fulfil most or all of the needs for romance, sex, intimacy, parenting and so on. As a result, they participate in the kind of creative relationship-formation that Foucault identified as the value of friendship. Thus, this critique is thorough-going, articulate and *lived*, especially in the dialogue-focussed *Friends with Kids*, and the friendships—and what they enable—are depicted in both films as transgressive and significant. The turn back towards normativity at the close of both films, then, brings with it a peculiar significance, especially for the relationship between cruel optimism and heteronormativity.

Let's Be Friends: Friendship as the Recognition of Cruel Optimism

Friends with Benefits and *Friends with Kids* are two recent movies that, at least to begin with, explore contemporary challenges to the heteronormative monogamous coupledom formula. In both movies, a man and a woman who are already very close friends make the (apparently, according to the films, very unusual) choice to share a part of their life they usually reserve for their (potential) love-relationships: in *Friends with Benefits*, Jamie and Dylan begin having sex together, and in *Friends with Kids*, Jules and Jason have a baby together. These decisions are both made because the arrangement enables the individuals to fulfil a desire that is conventionally associated with a love-relationship, while also pursuing their love-relationships separately, enabling the fulfilment of a range of needs.

This decision is a form of resistance to heteronormative requirements of love-relationships, situating intimate, different-sex friendship as a site of potential resistance in a similar way to Foucault's description of the potentials of homosexuality: “Homosexuality is a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities... because the “slantwise” position of the [homosexual], as it were, the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light” (206). That is, as a result of these apparent transgressions of the usual line between friendship and relationship, both films lay out, though also undermine, some interesting critiques of heteronormative dating and married life.

Throughout *Friends with Benefits*, Jamie and Dylan explicitly refer to, and reject, the heteronormative fantasies depicted in porn and (more often) in romantic comedies. This playful self-reflexivity has been characteristic of romantic comedies over the past few decades, so that this generic referentiality in fact becomes part of the signalling that despite the title, the film falls firmly within the genre. Indeed, the occasion of the “deal” developed by Jamie and Dylan follows the shared viewing of a made-up romantic comedy, in an echo of a number of earlier romantic comedies which also use the watching of a romantic film to situate themselves generically (McDonald 94).

This kind of self-reflexivity goes beyond generic self-referentiality, however, and demonstrates both an awareness of, and engagement with, entertainment-consumption as “public pedagogy” (Giroux). Their conversation following the film critiques the role that entertainment-consumption plays, first, in the constitution of heteronormativity in its broadest sense—that is, including complementary and distinct gender roles, models for romance, models for proper heterosex, and the goal-defined temporality of dating leading to commitment—and second, in the cruel optimism involved in becoming attached to heteronormativity.

In an articulation of self-aware and self-reflexively critical cruel optimism, Jamie says “God, I wish my life was a movie sometimes. You know, I'd never have to worry about my hair, or having to go to the bathroom. And then when I'm at my lowest point, some guy would chase me down the street, pour his heart out and we'd kiss. Happily ever after.” Dylan rolls his eyes over her sentimentality and suggests that women's problematic tendency to imagine their own lives and desires through these filmic fantasies is part of what complicates sex. He suggests, that is, that women's cruel optimism with regard to relationships unnecessarily complicates the shared fulfilment of sexual needs, because they perpetually laden such encounters with impossible hopes. This is reasonably well-trod ground for romantic comedies, with *He's Just Not That Into You*, for example, both sustaining and critiquing women's cruel optimism surrounding relationships. But uncharacteristically, Jamie challenges the implication that only women are gullible enough to form their fantasies through film, arguing that the pedagogical significance of romantic comedies for women is matched by men's sexual education through watching porn, and their resultant inability and unwillingness to fulfil women's hopes, not only in terms of romance, but also in terms of fulfilling sex. She suggests that the disjunction in men's and women's investments in heterosexual sex result from different attachments to different objects—easy, fulfilling, exciting sex in which women's pleasure inevitably follows from men pursuing theirs, as apparently depicted in porn, and romantic, intimate, fulfilling and relationship-oriented sex, as depicted in romantic films.

This shared critique becomes the grounds on which Dylan and Jamie decide to reject these norms and add the “benefits” of sex to their friendship *because* they don't “like [each other] like that,” and so are able to perform the “physical act [of sex]... like a game of tennis.” Instead of retaining their attachment to the “happy objects” of the romantic relationship that will fulfil them sexually, they seek to meet their “needs” for sex while avoiding “complications... emotions... and guilt” that they associate with sex within love-relationships as a result of mismatched expectations.

This critique is extended into their initial sex scene, which explicitly challenges the heteronormative Hollywood depiction of “normal” heterosexual penis-in-vagina sex which is supposed to come naturally to both parties, through the man's activity, while the woman generally remains passive. It also challenges the generic conventions of mainstream porn, which depict men as in control, and women as extremely easily orgasmic. This depiction, then, becomes a funny and self-aware pedagogical moment which draws attention to the space that can be found in giving up the object of heteronormativity.

The first lies in the challenge to heteronormative gender roles. Jamie refuses normative femininity, telling Dylan, “Since we're just friends, I don't need to be insecure about my body.” She also refuses the normative characterisation of women's sexuality as passive and receptive, listing her likes and dislikes in the expectation that they will be respected: “My nipples are sensitive, I don't like dirty talk, and if I'd known this was going to happen, I would have shaved my legs this morning.” Dylan echoes her rejection of normative gender roles, refusing hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt), especially in its claim to physical control, when he responds with “My chin is ticklish, I sneeze sometimes after I come, and if I'd have known this was going to happen, I *wouldn't* have shaved my legs this morning.” Their friendship, then, allows them greater explicitness in their requests, refusals, demands and negotiations in the encounter, and in their

appreciation and rejection of various sensations, body parts and behaviours (well beyond PIV sex) than they are permitted in the heteronormative sex they have with potential love-interests. This level of honesty and sexual agency, especially from Jamie but also from Dylan, counters heteronormative depictions of sex, and instead presents sex as an explicit negotiation. It also reveals the extent to which heteronormative dating rituals, depicted throughout the movie, frequently undermine rather than enhance communication because sex is situated as “coming naturally,” resulting in sex which is inherently compromising for all those involved, whatever their investments in the encounter.

The critique of cruel optimism is well-developed and articulate in *Friends with Kids*, primarily because it is dialogue-heavy, and depicts some of the complex realities of parenting and relationships. The main characters, Jules and Jason, do not explicitly reject fantasies about heteronormative parenting, relationship and lifestyles, as Jamie and Dylan do. Indeed, such fantasies are implicitly recognised as unachievable, but their focus is on avoiding the compulsory drudgery that seems to be associated with having children. They recognise the cruel optimism that leads people into conventional familial and parenting lives because their friends, the two couples of Missy and Ben, and Leslie and Alex, are already living evidence (for them, at least) of an attachment that undermines their well-being, in Berlant’s terms. Missy and Ben have a passionate history, but their relationship breaks down over the course of the film, supposedly under the pressures of “real life” (that is, life with kids). Leslie and Alex have two children, and are deeply in love, emotionally and physically exhausted, and argue very frequently.

It is the difficult lives these couples live that shapes the protagonists’ decision to have a child together without being in a relationship with one another:

Jason: Why don’t we just do it?... We love each other, we trust each other, we’re responsible, gainfully employed and totally not attracted to each other physically.

Jules: Yeah, that’d be perfect. Beat the system.

Jason: Right. We have the kid, share all the responsibility and just skip over the whole marriage and divorce nightmare.

The challenge to the “happy object” of heteronormative family life is extremely explicit. When Jules and Jason announce their plan to Leslie and Alex, they refer to their friends’ situations as “tragic”, a “trap” and as “kill[ing] the romance.” And indeed, for at least a large portion of the movie, this pragmatic assessment and their solution to it does seem to provide them both with happiness: they both have romance with other people, while raising a child together.

Leslie and Alex, however, provide a counterpoint to the challenge to cruel optimism that Jules and Jason embody. They are sympathetically depicted, with real warmth and honesty towards each other, even in the presence of their flaws, and this, as I will shortly show, becomes a way that the film holds open the possibility of the optimistic attachment to heteronormative relationship styles. But Leslie’s response to Jules and Jason’s plan to co-parent while not in a relationship together displays some of the characteristics of cruel optimism, as Berlant describes them. Alex understands Jules’s and Jason’s plan, summarising “you want to have a kid, but without all the shit that comes with marriage,” but Leslie is insulted. She argues that Jules’s and Jason’s plan is “an affront to us... to all normal people who struggle and make sacrifices and make commitments to make a relationship work, yes, it’s insulting! To us specifically and us in general... You don’t think it’s insulting to our way of life?” This appeal to a “way of life,” as a justification for struggling and making sacrifices reveals this way of life as a “continuity of the form of [attachment, which] provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world,” as Berlant puts it. Alex responds that “We don’t exactly have a way of life, babe... it’s a brave new world!” This exchange goes to the heart of the film’s later resolution of the question of cruel optimism. It leaves open the question, resolved by Jules and Jason, about whether the heteronormative marriage and parenting style is, in fact, a normative “way of life,” an object deemed “good,” which one makes sacrifices to remain attached to or aligned with; or whether heteronormativity is the simple product of romantic feeling, a “reality” denied by Jules’s and Jason’s supposed reliance on reason and pragmatics, at least until the climax of the film.

Transgression to Normativity: Romantic Feeling as Real, not Optimistic

In both films, despite these robust declarations of the awareness of the traps of “cruel optimism” as attached to heteronormative love relationships, the climax is true “rom-com,” with the unusual friendships inevitably becoming love-relationships. The apparent impossibility of arranging one’s life around what Foucault identifies as a “multiplicity of relationships” (204) beyond conventional institutions becomes clear in a number of key scenes. This impossibility arises because of the recalcitrance of romantic feeling, which is situated as challenging the “sensible” and apparently overly pragmatic solutions developed by the protagonists in response to their particular situations.

Despite romantic feeling being situated as problematically encouraging people to attach to normative relationship forms that continually disappoint and require compromise, both films return to romantic feeling to suggest that if you love someone else enough, that feeling will ensure that the relationship never becomes a threat to well-being; it, in other words, is the sufficient grounds for an optimism that is *not* cruel. Disappointment, as manifested in the worn-down Missy and Ben in *Friends with Kids*, and in Jamie’s hapless romance with the apparently perfect but actually manipulative and self-absorbed Parker, becomes synonymous with an optimistic misrecognition of lust for love: cruel optimism resituated as the result of personal error rather than the inadequacy of the “good object” of heteronormative marriage relationships. In other words, romantic feeling (which these same films have robustly critiqued for its role in ensuring people accept normative relationship formations which threaten their well-being, rather than working towards alternatives that suit their needs), becomes the ground for the protagonists doing precisely that.

In *Friends with Benefits*, it is Jamie’s unconventional mother, who has herself rejected normative relationship styles, who reminds Jamie of her attachment to the “happy object” of a conventional relationship, and warns her that her friendship with Dylan might prevent her from finding her fantasised love-relationship. This motherly advice, then, functions to remind Jamie of her original optimistic attachment, and situate her current friendship—for all of her enjoyment of it—as problematic. Dylan’s sister is instead amused that Dylan’s pragmatic commitment to his friends-with-benefits arrangement with Jamie blocks his recognition that he is *already* in a love-relationship, brought about by his feelings for Jamie. In *Friends with Kids*, it is Jules’s jealousy, a hallmark of conventional monogamous coupledom, of Jason’s current love interest that becomes her “clue” that she is already in love with Jason. Jason, of course, fulfilling the heteronormative stereotype of the emotionally insensitive man, hurts her repeatedly until he, too, waiting at a red traffic light that turns green, realises that he is in love with Jules and does a U-turn.

In both films, the achievement of coupledom out of friendship is treated as a successful reconfiguration of heteronormative love-relationships, beyond normativity, and certainly beyond the dangers of a cruel optimism. Heteronormative love-relationships become no longer the problem. The problem is, instead, the protagonists’ fantasies about them, their desires for more and other styles of relationships, and, most of all, the privileging of creative, pragmatic reason over the inevitable reality of their romantic feelings.

In *Friends with Benefits*, Jamie is told that she must give up her attachment to the white-knight fantasy, and instead discover the reality of being in love with her best friend. Dylan goes down on one knee, reconfiguring the proposal scene, playing on but reconfiguring the “happy object” to which Jamie is attached, and asks “Will you be my best friend again?” following this up with “Look, I can live without ever having sex with you again... It’d be really hard. I want my best friend back because I’m in love with her.” This implies that the cruel optimism involved in the attachment to heteronormative love-relationships, which the two have critiqued together, lies solely in their fantasies about them, and not in the structure of their relationship. This is apparently the case even though the final scene involves Jamie sacrificing, apparently happily, the dream of the horse-and-carriage romantic date as depicted in the end of the made-up film watched at the beginning of their “deal.”

In *Friends with Kids*, Jules follows her emotional reaction to Jason’s romantic life to discover her romantic feelings for him, and from this, despite their creative rethinking of relationships and friendships earlier in the film, concludes that she must be seeking a conventional, heteronormative love-relationship with him. Jason has to overcome his nightmarish fantasies about nuclear familial life and his associated aversion to conventional love-relationships in order to recognise how profoundly he loves Jules. Again, the film implies that this feeling inevitably leads to a life that is surprisingly conventional. This conventionality is even attached to heterosexual sexual intimacy, the supposed “missing piece” which distinguished their friendship from a romantic relationship. They have avoided sex together throughout their lives except for the single occasion required to conceive their son Joel, as is made clear in the final words of the film:

Please, please, just let me fuck the shit out of you right now. And if you’re not convinced afterwards that I am into you in every possible way a person can be into another person, then I promise I will never try to kiss you, or fuck you, or impregnate you ever again, as long as I live.

It also, as with *Friends with Benefits*, demonstrates the apparently authentic inhabitation of heteronormative relationships through the on-the-fly allusion to marriage vows (Dylan’s going down on one knee, Jason’s “as long as I live”) in a “new” context. In both cases, then, the transgressive and creative restructuring of their intimate lives becomes a step on a teleological journey towards heteronormativity, one which situates the protagonists as uniquely able to *choose*, with apparent freedom from both the seemingly coercive pedagogy of both entertainment and real life, and from the cruel optimism so frequently associated with it, the “happy object” of heteronormativity. Through their counternormative creativity, then, heteronormativity is given a new lease of life, apparently the natural and inevitable outcome of love.

Conclusion

This exploration of the recent films *Friends with Kids* and *Friends with Benefits* has elaborated the recent turn towards depicting “unconventional” relationship and friendship styles in romantic comedies. Both films provide a critique of the cruel optimism associated with heteronormative love relationships, especially in their institutionalised form. They go beyond earlier more cynical romantic comedies such as *Annie Hall*, however, in that the protagonists do not merely recognise the inadequacies, compromises, sacrifices and dissatisfaction produced by going along with the fantasised “good object” of conventional marriage. Instead, as if following Foucault, they get creative with their relationship styles, reallocating certain forms of relating and sharing conventionally associated solely with the romantic relationship—sex and parenting—to their friendships. In both cases, however, the creative mode of relating becomes a temporary matter.

Whilst this could have been an *Annie Hall*-style challenge to the ideal of stability in relationships of all kinds, and a rethinking of the problematic equation which sees relationships worth in its longevity, it instead becomes an occasion to recuperate the cruel optimism associated with heteronormativity. The rejection of “cruel optimism” is finally depicted in both films as an overly pragmatic denial of feeling, and the “threats to well-being” which have been recognised in the critique of heteronormativity are re-situated as erroneous fantasy-nightmares: apparently the marriage-like relationship is not *necessarily* a threat to well-being, if you choose the right partner; and on the other hand, if you are too busy creatively fulfilling your needs, you might miss the right partner—a cruel cynicism of attachment to non-normativity, perhaps. In this way, the attachment to the *critique* becomes situated, in the denouement of both films—namely each man recognising that they do love the woman—as the site of “cruel optimism.” For both couples, it turns out that the transgressive deployment of friendship becomes inadequate for the fulfilment of their needs apparently because of their feelings for each other, though it is never entirely clear how this stands in the way. This reproduction of the “happy object” of a marriage-style relationship, then, is primarily situated as allowing the romantic attachment to simply be whatever it “really” is.

Echoing throughout these films is a recurrent theme: the claim is that participating in conventional heteronormative arrangement of love-relationships and friendships *because* it is dominant could, indeed, be problematic in the way that Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism clarifies. As a pedagogical form, explicitly and self-reflexively noted by Jamie and Dylan, then, this storyline “test-drives” non-normativity only to discover heteronormativity at the heart of romantic feeling. Monogamy, heteronormativity, and profoundly normative modes of relating, here, are situated not as conformity, but as both the natural outcome of a man and a woman falling in love *and* a choice made from a place of knowing non-normativity and its apparent inability to fulfil desires. It thus becomes possible to *choose* heteronormativity because it works as an expression of the truth of romantic feeling; indeed, the implication becomes that heteronormativity is not the “good object” we are, in more and less forcible ways, aligned with and required to be attached to, but the coincidentally frequent outcome of choosing romantic feeling over other needs. The critique of cruel optimism and the depiction of non-normative styles of relating thus becomes an occasion for the reconstitution of a supposed “true” optimism, guaranteed by, in rom-com terms, finding “the one.”

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